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C O N F I D E N T I A L MONROVIA 000258

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W, INR/AA

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [EAIR](#) [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [LI](#) [PGOV](#)
SUBJECT: LIBERIA: AIRPORT SECURITY DEFICIENCIES MAY DELAY
DELTA AIRLINES START-UP

REF: 08 MONROVIA 345

Classified By: Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: It remains unlikely that Roberts International Airport (RIA) will meet minimum standards for certification by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) in time for Delta Airlines' scheduled inauguration of direct flights between the United States and Liberia June 8, despite remarkable progress in the last 12 months in safety and security at RIA. A TSA team visiting Monrovia April 5-8 noted significant improvements in the design and implementation of security measures and has mapped out a high-impact capacity building program to start in May. Responsibility for preparing for Delta flights is now firmly vested in the Liberia Civil Aviation Authority (LCAA) following the passage April 2 of the Liberia Airport Authority Act (LAAA) that consolidates authority for Air Traffic Control (ATC), security and fire/rescue under the LCAA, and the resignation February 23 of RIA Managing Director Abraham Simmons, leaving LCAA Director General Richelieu Williams in charge of both the LCAA and RIA. Although there is some suggestion that a proposal for Lockheed Martin to take over the management of RIA as part of a 25-year concession agreement might accelerate improvements, the scope of that contract remains ambiguous and GOL approval far from certain. President Sirleaf is meeting separately with Lockheed and Delta officials in Washington DC on or about April 16 (and with the Secretary of State on April 24) and it will be important for TSA and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to clearly communicate any concerns regarding the commencement of direct flights to Delta prior to those meetings and for the USG to reinforce our commitment to the GOL to support their efforts to meet aviation requirements without further delay. END SUMMARY.

TSA finds Liberia airport security
much improved, but still inadequate

¶2. (C) The April 5-8 TSA Aviation Security Sustainable International Standards Team (ASSIST) visit noted considerable progress in addressing the recommendations from two previous TSA airport assessments in April 2008 and February 2009, including enhanced perimeter security, improved screening, progress on written security policies and a more rational organizational structure. Nevertheless, the team reported April 8 that Delta's plan to start flights in June was "extremely ambitious" given the substantial weaknesses that remain in quality control, training, and program development and approval. Delta Airlines representatives have mentioned that the airline could fill any gaps in security themselves, but the TSA team noted there was no precedent for granting such an exception. Members of

the TSA team noted that TSA officials had met with Delta at the end of March, but it is unclear if TSA has yet communicated a decision to Delta regarding certification of RIA for the June flights. The LCAA granted Delta a provisional Air Service License on March 31 to begin flights in June.

13. (C) Delta Airlines has already begun advertising for seats beginning June 8, but Delta corporate security representatives in town April 6-10 told EmbOffs April 9 in confidence that they intended to report back to Delta management that Liberia would be unable to make the necessary improvements to meet the June 8 deadline. They said shortfalls in screening procedures, training, quality control and several other areas were too extensive to repair in only two months. They expressed a willingness to work with TSA ASSIST to address remaining deficiencies with an aggressive capacity building program as soon as possible. They also said they were aware of the March meeting between TSA and Delta but were not apprised of the results of that meeting.

Liberia CAA consolidates control
over aviation safety and security

14. (C) Several recent developments have put to rest turf battles between RIA management and LCAA officials regarding the ultimate authority and responsibility to prepare Liberia for Delta flights. The Liberian legislature passed April 2 the Liberia Airport Authority Act which, once signed by the President, will consolidate authority for security, fire and rescue and air traffic control under the LCAA. Previously RIA management had exercised some autonomous authority to manage these services independently from LCAA oversight. Moreover, following the President's decision to dissolve the RIA Board of Directors in December 2008 and the resignation of RIA Managing Director Abraham Simmons on February 23, the President appointed LCAA Director General Richelieu Williams as interim Managing Director. Williams later appointed a colleague, Bill Jones, as interim "General Manager", but in practice Williams is now firmly in control of both LCAA and RIA until a Board of Directors for the Liberia Airport Authority is established in accordance with the new law. (Note: Both Williams and Jones worked for Pan Am in the 1970s; Pan Am managed RIA from 1941-1984. End note).

Lockheed Martin Management Contract
for airport remains uncertain

15. (C) Ultimately, Williams wants the GOL to award a 25-year concession to Lockheed Martin for the management of RIA, and possibly other Liberian domestic airports (reftel) as a way of locking in more responsible security and safety standards. Lockheed first expressed interest in RIA in April 2008 and later signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the GOL in September 2008 to enter into negotiations. Lockheed's initial contract proposal in December 2008 was not well-received by cabinet members involved in the Inter-Ministerial Concession Committee that is responsible for awarding concession agreements. GOL officials expressed concern that Lockheed had proposed to take over management but did not provide any commitment to invest in airport infrastructure upgrades. One Lockheed official involved in planning the project conceded in confidence to EconOff in January that the contract offered very little for Liberia in return for the concession and that there was significant internal disagreement within Lockheed regarding the wisdom of the concession. Lockheed subsidiary Pacific Architects and Engineers (PAE) is involved in training the Armed Forces of Liberia and the Liberia National Police, and provides advisors to the Ministry of Justice. It appears that Lockheed sees Liberia as a foothold in the expanding Africa market (to include potential AFRICOM activities), and control of RIA would assist future endeavors.

¶6. (C) Williams acknowledges the deal would not include extensive infrastructure improvements, but says Lockheed control would improve management, confidence and credibility that would then allow the Airport Authority to secure financing for terminal and other upgrades. Williams also argued that Lockheed management would "take the politics out" of airport management and put an end to political interference into airport operations, including constant requests for VIP exceptions to security rules. Lockheed Martin officials are preparing a revised contract proposal for a meeting between President Sirleaf and Lockheed's Executive Vice President in Washington DC on April 16.

Comment

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Direct air service between the United States and Liberia is a top priority for both the Sirleaf administration and the U.S. government. The President empowered the LCAA and the RIA to do what was necessary to get the airport ready and aviation officials and staff have already delivered convincing results in many areas. USG agencies including USAID, TSA and FAA have given generous technical and other assistance to Liberia to reach this stage and the capacity for further, rapid improvement is strong, even absent a Lockheed Martin contract. The October 2008 announcement that Delta would begin service in June 2009 was an immediate political boost to the President and unleashed a wave of excitement and activity to meet the June deadline. That momentum remains strong. It is vital that any USG concerns regarding the commencement of direct flights in June be communicated openly and immediately to the GOL and Delta so that Delta can make necessary adjustments to their rollout schedule and the GOL can manage any negative fallout those concerns might raise. It is also important that relevant USG agencies move quickly to support the GOL with urgent assistance to maintain the momentum to meet the standards required to start direct flights without further delay.

THOMAS-GREENFIELD